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ABSTRACT

The writing test at Colorado State University determines which students move from basic composition into the college composition course. Initially, all incoming students take a placement test similar to the holistically scored writing tests administered by the Educational Testing Service. This placement test, along with other information, provides generalizations about the students' skills and deficiencies. Once appropriately placed, students in the basic writing course find themselves focusing on writing skills--generating ideas, organizing them to communicate clearly to readers, developing them fully to convince readers, and editing them to reduce distractions. As a pretest at the beginning of the semester, students write an essay on an accessible topic in one hour. At the end of the semester, students are asked to write on a parallel topic. Because of the pretesting and posttesting, instructors can compare skills at the beginning and end of the semester and can evaluate skills that are expected of any student completing the basic course. Failing tests are examined along with other writing the weak students have produced during the semester. If students fail the final exam because of limited but consistent problems that they have begun to master in the final weeks of the semester, they are usually passed with hopes that they will master specific skills early in the next semester. Instructors of subsequent composition classes have applauded this testing process since it guarantees them more homogeneous classes. (HOD)

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Testing Basic Writers' Proficiency: An Effective Model

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CS 207 815

Kate Kiefer
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Testing Basic Writers' Proficiency: An Effective Model

Teachers of basic writing are often called upon to demonstrate the effectiveness of basic writing courses and to guarantee students' ability to succeed in subsequent writing courses. While we may not happily accept the burden of competency testing, we often find ourselves forced to establish such tests and thus must concern ourselves with devising fair, reasonable, and effective competency tests. First, as writing teachers, we must be concerned with finding a test of WRITING skills. Although results from standardized tests of grammar and usage correlate well with ultimate success in academe, writing teachers should not accept such tests as adequate measures of writing skills. One critic of standardized testing points out that the number of televisions in a student's home or the family income correlates equally well with academic success. Moreover, most writing teachers have unearthed bright students who score well on standardized tests but who can't write coherent paragraphs. If our testing reflects our emphasis on producing focused, fully detailed, and coherent texts, then we must test writing and not recognition of error or accepted usage.

Another difficulty for testers is to articulate clearly just what skills are being tested, to define criteria appropriate for students' needs and for the curriculum. Furthermore, although we spend little time determining validity and reliability of tests we give in composition, these factors should be important to us. A good competency test should

discriminate well between those who have mastered clearly defined writing skills and those who have not. A valid test will give similar results time after time. If possible, a sound competency test should represent a variety of writing tasks common in college or workplace writing so that students are assured of the practical value of their writing instruction. Students will react more positively to competency testing if they see that the skills required are skills the work world acknowledges as important.

And beyond these general concerns for valid or appropriate testing, teachers must also consider what happens to students who fail the test. If failing a writing test prohibits a student from graduating, and if the student has no recourse but to drop out of school, then the writing test will surely be scored on a different scale than the test that determines whether students pass on to a second composition course in a three-semester sequence.

In addition to these general concerns, at Colorado State University we are also faced with practical, administrative concerns. First, our graduate teaching assistants are drawn from Master's programs and thus teach for us for only two years. We supervise them closely and need a competency test that relieves them of the burden of failing students who clearly do not meet our standards. Inexperienced teachers often falter when asked to fail a student who has worked hard, made progress, but still cannot meet standards. Moreover, because CSU has only one composition course required of all

undergraduates at the university, we need to assure all faculty that students entering the college composition course from the basic writing course will not hinder their classmates.

Our test is not a university requirement for graduation; rather, it determines only which students move from basic composition into our college composition course. As I will make clear, though, the testing method effectively answers the concerns I have outlined while providing additional pedagogical benefits.

Before describing our testing method, let me provide some necessary background on the composition program at CSU, including our initial placement exam, the profile of students placed into basic writing (CO101), and the focus of the course. All incoming students--freshmen and transfer students lacking credit in composition--take a placement test similar to the holistically scored writing tests administered by ETS. At CSU, students read a selected passage on a topic of general knowledge, summarize the main points in the passage, and then develop a response agreeing or disagreeing with the main points. The scoring criteria for this placement test clearly discriminate students at the top and bottom of the scale: students who summarize completely and clearly, who state a clear thesis, and who develop a thorough response typically test out of the composition sequence at CSU; students who only summarize, who cannot organize or develop their responses, or who have repeated, serious errors are placed into our basic

composition class. About 6% of the students taking the test in any year test out of composition altogether; some 23% are placed into the fundamentals course each year.

This placement test, combined with other information, allows us to generalize about our students' skills and deficiencies. When we consider relatively objective measures of students' preparation for college composition, we note that students placed into our basic writing course have SAT verbal scores ranging from 200 to 640, high school English averages from 1.7 to 4.0, and percentile rankings from 30 to 100 (the latter being the valedictorian of the class). Students placed into our college composition course have similar scores, though some students have higher SAT verbal scores. Such scores alone simply do not distinguish students who will benefit from a basic writing class from those who need very little work on academic writing to succeed at the university. Yet when we ask students about their background as writers, we quickly develop a profile of the unpracticed writer for students placed into CO101. On questionnaires, these students commonly report having taken media, broadcasting, and theatre courses (stagecraft) in lieu of high school English courses with writing as a major component. Perhaps even more disturbing, a significant number of these students report having read only one or two books during their high school years--although most read one or two books a year during high school--and most tell us that SPORTS ILLUSTRATED and SEVENTEEN constitute their regular reading. About half have written analytic prose in their senior year in high school, and of those, the most

common assignment has been a "research" paper graded more on form than on content. Although our basic writers are by no means as deficient as the typical writer Mina Shaughnessy describes in ERRORS AND EXPECTATIONS, neither are they ready for college composition.

Once appropriately placed, students in the basic writing course find themselves focusing on writing skills--generating ideas, organizing them to communicate clearly to readers, developing them fully to convince readers, and editing to reduce distractions. Students write paragraphs of 100 to 300 words every week, practicing strategies for developing their ideas. Because we have focused on specific writing skills we expect our basic writing course to teach, we are able to design a test that measures students' mastery of these skills and then evaluate carefully weaker students' progress at semester's end.

Let me describe our testing model briefly and then discuss its valuable features. Students write a pre-test on an accessible topic in one hour at the beginning of the semester. Generally, we have two parallel topics for the pre-test, best and worst teachers, for instance. One half of the students write on one topic; the other half write on the opposite topic. At the end of the semester, students write on the parallel topic they did not see at the beginning of the semester. We code pre-tests so that scorers cannot distinguish pre- and post-tests, mix pre- and post-tests, and score all tests in a single three to four hour session. We

use a six-point scale with clearly defined criteria for each point and range in the scale, and we distribute model paragraphs for each range. In all holistic scoring sessions, we standardize carefully before and during the scoring.

Why do we feel that our competency test is effective? We see clear benefits of our test design, consistent scoring, and results that satisfy our concerns outlined at the beginning of this paper.

Through pre-testing, we can examine new topics as valid measures of the skills taught in the course. One of our measures for the accessibility of topics involves reading a percentage of the pre-tests to determine typical problems students had with the topic. A small group of experienced teachers and graders reads perhaps ten percent of the diagnostic paragraphs drawn randomly from all pre-tests. If students seem to flounder because of the topic or wording of the assignment, we revise the topic before administering it again. Only by screening topics can we feel confident that we have removed unduly difficult ones.

As we read pre-tests, we also consider how we might revise the criteria for our holistic scoring exercise. We choose model paragraphs and samples that illustrate the range of students' skills. We also anticipate the training process--standardizing--and select samples that will illustrate appropriate and inappropriate responses to the topic. If we know from past experience that readers react positively

or negatively to a particular response to an assignment, as for instance the occasional inability to follow directions precisely, we choose at least one sample paragraph so that we can discuss an appropriate response with the entire group of scorers.

As a final benefit of our test design, the pre-tests help us guard against a weakness inherent in the holistic method of scoring papers. Readers often balk at using the entire range of scores available to them. In particular, scorers hesitate to assign the highest and lowest scores. When we have not mixed pre- and post-tests, we have noticed a strong tendency to assign only middle-range scores. By mixing pre- and post-tests, we know that at least one-third of the papers should fall into the lower range of scores. Scorers presented with many poor papers soon overcome their reluctance to assign lower-range scores. In contrast, well-written papers stand out so that they easily receive high scores, thus assuring that the entire scoring scale gets used.

In addition to the benefits of this test design, our competency test allows us to gauge students' progress, not subjectively through analytic scoring, but objectively. Our model provides two standards of comparison: because of pre- and post-testing, we can compare skills at the beginning and end of the semester and because we collect data from one semester to the next, we can evaluate skills we expect of any student completing the basic course. Specifically, when we compare pre- and post-test means, students average between 1.8

and 2.1 on the pre-test and between 3.5 and 3.7 on the post-test. Students, thus, typically gain between 1.5 and 2 full points over the semester, a significant gain on a six-point scale. We have noted these gains over the full three years of using the testing procedure. Furthermore, we have computed the reliability of these scores by having readers rescore samples used from one grading session to the next and by computing the inter-rater reliability of scores assigred to the same paper. Our GTAs find the pre-tests slightly more difficult to score than the post-tests: they consistently assign more pre-tests split scores so that we must read between 17 and 22 percent of pre-tests a third time (for IRR of 78 to 82%). On post-tests, two scorers agree on a score between 85 and 92 percent of the time.

A second measure of successful scoring appears in the rate of students failing the test and failing the course. Since we began administering a holistically-scored "final exam" or competency test, 18 to 20% fail the test and 12% fail the course. Only in spring semester 1983 did we see any significant change in this measure: only 14% failed the test and 8% failed the course. We have used the topic successfully in the past and so cannot attribute this drop in failure rate to an exceptionally easy topic. We did introduce computer-assisted editing for students and so must test further to see if that aid accounts for greater student success in the course.

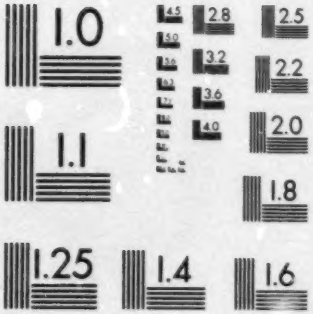
A final major success for our testing program comes from the

limitations we set for it. We do not expect it simply to cull poor writers so that they do not pass the course. Rather, we pull out failing tests and then consider other writing weak students have produced during the semester. Every failing final paper is reviewed by the instructor and the supervisor of the program. Students who have had an "off" day are easy to spot, mainly because we can look at other impromptu writing samples. But we also consider students' edited work, attitudes, and achievement. If students fail the final exam because of limited but consistent problems that they have begun to master in the final weeks of the semester, we will usually pass those students in hopes that they will master specific skills early in the next semester. Each case, however, is unique, and we must consider both the strengths and weaknesses of each student. The GTAs feel comfortable with this process because they often find themselves unduly influenced by emotional reactions to the student--just as often negative as positive. By reviewing students' work with me, instructors often see how to help basic writers achieve success in our course or other basic writing courses they will teach.

I must mention other positive reactions to our testing model. Instructors of the subsequent composition class applaud our testing process because it guarantees them more homogeneous classes. Perhaps even more important, students themselves react positively. They support the notion that all students taking the course are judged according to the same standards, a policy not found in most other multiple section courses at

CSU or other institutions. They appreciate the "accountability" the test imposes on their instructors and on them, and they praise the objectivity of scoring because they see that more than one instructor contributes to the final score. Finally, while students frequently disparage the basic writing class while they are taking it, they praise the course once they move to the subsequent course, CO150, in part because the test gives them confidence as writers. Moreover, unlike students who place out of CO101, students who have passed the competency test after taking CO101 have mastered skills that help them achieve higher grades in CO150 than students who do not take CO101.

Our test, then, is reliable and effective for students, instructors, and administrators. With such an objective measure of students' and teachers' success, we have been able to convince any who question our writing program that we have set attainable but demanding writing goals we can help students meet.



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